

Gates's Role in Iran Reports Questioned

Experts at CIA Allegedly Barred From Process That Led to Arms Sales

By Walter Pincus
and George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writers

A week after the Iran-contra scandal was disclosed five years ago, the CIA's top analyst on Iran wrote an angry 10-page memo charging that the covert arms sales to that country represented "a perversion of the intelligence process staggering in its proportions."

In that Dec. 2, 1986, memo, the analyst, Thomas M. Barksdale, said false information had been used as the basis for the operation. He added that he and other Iran analysts in the directorate "were never consulted or asked to provide an intelligence input to the covert actions and secret contacts that have occurred."

The Barksdale memo and another document that challenges the basis for the secret arms sales to Iran are scheduled for official release today at Senate hearings on the nomination of Robert M. Gates to be CIA director. They are expected to be used by Gates's opponents to demonstrate his alleged involvement in slanting intelligence when he was one of the agency's highest-ranking officials. The question of what role Gates may have played could be crucial to his confirmation.

In testimony prepared to be delivered today, Harold P. Ford, former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council who is now a part-time historian for the CIA, summed up what seems to be a consensus view among Gates's critics: "Bob Gates has often depended too much on his own individual analytic judgments and has ignored or scorned the views of others whose assessments did not accord with his own. This would be okay if he were uniquely all-seeing. He has not been

The "Eyes Only" memo Barksdale

wrote deals primarily with the exclusion of CIA intelligence experts from what he called "the small coterie of people" who had been privy to the covert sales of U.S. arms to Iran which began in the summer of 1985.

Writing to then-deputy director for intelligence Richard J. Kerr, Barksdale said "a unique channel for providing intelligence to the National Security Council on Iran" had been set up that excluded the normal analytical experts.

Instead, he said, CIA covert operations officers were providing "exclusive reports to the White House," some of which made assertions "at odds with the overwhelming bulk of intelligence reporting, both from U.S. sources and foreign intelligence services."

One claim Barksdale singled out as inaccurate was that a "middle of the road faction" existed in Iran that might be favorably disposed towards the United States. Barksdale said this view was at odds with his judgments and those of his colleagues in the CIA's intelligence directorate (DDI).

Barksdale went on to say that a more general problem had developed. "As a DDI analyst," he said, "I increasingly find I am being denied timely access to the full range of data I need to do my job as I think it should be done." With the creation of new components at the agency that could be used to supplant traditional channels, he said, there seemed to be an increasing number of privileged individuals who were "guaranteed a hearing at high levels of the agency or the government without coordinating their opinions with other components."

Another "Eyes Only" memo, sent to Kerr as a sort of post-mortem after the scandal broke, raised serious questions in stark, matter-of-fact prose about the integrity of the May 1985 intelligence estimate that was

used by the Reagan White House to justify the arms sales to Iran.

Written on Jan. 28, 1987, by the top Soviet expert in the CIA's intelligence directorate, Douglas J. MacEachin, director of the Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA), the memo said the skeptical views of his analysts were suppressed, and other statements inserted in a section they had drafted, without their knowledge or consent.

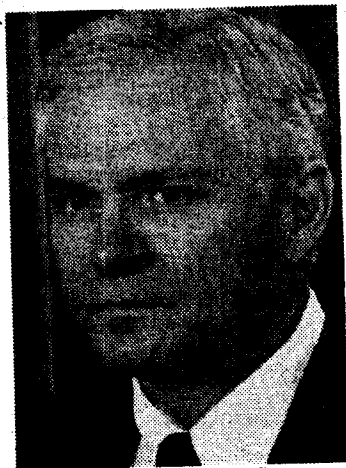
In this memo, MacEachin said that "significant changes" were made in the basic draft of the May 20, 1985, estimate by Graham Fuller, then CIA's National Intelligence Officer for the Near East, "without informing SOVA."

The estimate that Fuller had put together was done at a time Gates, as deputy director for intelligence and chairman of the National Intelligence Council, had supervisory authority over such reports.

Presented as the consensus of the entire U.S. intelligence community, the estimate said that with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in declining health, there was a danger that the Soviet Union might make significant inroads in Iran at U.S. expense. It predicted that the Soviets would show flexibility on arms sales to Iran. It also said that the United States could not directly influence events in Tehran, but that other friendly countries, even Israel, could provide "entree," perhaps by selling arms.

White House officials were delighted with the document. On May 28, 1986, Donald Fortier, a high-ranking staffer at the National Security Council, wrote national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane:

"We . . . just got a bootleg copy of the draft SNIE [Special National Intelligence Estimate]. We worked closely with Graham Fuller on the approach, and I think it really is one of the best yet . . . I also think the Israeli option is one we have to pur-



ROBERT M. GATES

... accused of spurning others' views

sue, even though we may have to pay a certain price for the help."

By the time the first arms shipments were made in August-September 1985, they became tied to efforts to free American hostages in Lebanon held by pro-Iranian groups.

In the preparation of national intelligence estimates, strong dissents are traditionally expressed in footnotes. But MacEachin said in his after-action report that substantial revisions were made after SOVA drafted the Soviet section of the estimate.

He said two paragraphs were

added portraying the Soviets as being "well positioned" to increase their influence, and two "important judgments" were dropped, including one that said there was still mistrust between the communist regime in Moscow and the Islamic regime in Tehran.

In testimony to the Senate committee in February 1987, Gates implied there had been no dissent on the idea that the Soviets were poised to make inroads in Iran.

Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) pointed out at the outset of Gates's confirmation hearings two weeks ago that sections written by Soviet experts at CIA and experts on Iran at the State Department were dropped from the 1985 estimate that Fuller coordinated.

Just one month later, the Soviets withdrew the 1,000 technicians they still had in Iran and insisted that Iran enter negotiations to end its war with Iraq as a condition for improved relations.

Gates told Bradley "there was a disagreement, I later learned, in CIA" over the potential for Soviet inroads but, Gates said, "the analysts weren't excluded from involvement in the estimate. They simply did not have their views accepted." Gates went on to say the analysts didn't protest to anyone so he never knew of the dispute.

Staff writer Benjamin Weiser contributed to this report.